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SUBJECT: PANAMA: MERIDA AND PUBLIC MESSAGING

REF: PANAMA 176

¶1. (SBU) Summary: As we roll out the Merida Initiative in Panama, the Embassy has launched a public diplomacy campaign to inform Panamanians about the broad range of Merida programs, placing a special emphasis on crime prevention. Media coverage of drug-related violence in Mexico has cast Merida in a negative light with Panamanian policymakers and the public. Our public messages emphasize the U.S. role in supporting Panama's efforts to confront its fast-growing crime problem through community policing, at-risk youth programs and other crime prevention measures. The U.S. must be seen by Panamanians as part of the solution of stopping the violent crime that is increasingly plaguing their streets. If we are perceived as being only interested in interdicting drugs headed for the U.S., long term public support for our counternarcotics collaboration with Panama will fail. End Summary.

Merida Has an Image Problem

¶2. (SBU) Crime has increased significantly in Panama over the past two years, and polls show that crime and juvenile delinquency are overwhelmingly the number one issue that Panamanians worry about. At the same time, news media carry stories daily about ghastly drug-related violence in Mexico and the increasingly militarized nature of the drug war along the U.S. border. The Merida Initiative is often mentioned as the response to that crisis, and as a result, many Panamanians have come to associate Merida with a military solution to fighting drug traffickers. Panama lived under military dictatorship for 21 years and abolished its military after the removal of Manuel Noreiga in 1989. Panamanians are overwhelmingly opposed to any moves to "remilitarize" their country, and they view a military response to drug trafficking as inappropriate for their society.

Panama Wants Prevention

¶3. (SBU) In sharp contrast to Mexico, there is a growing consensus among policy makers in Panama that prevention and community-oriented efforts are the long-term solution to the country's growing problem of crime and delinquency. Presidential candidate Ricardo Martinelli, who is currently favored to win the May 3 presidential election promotes his "safe streets" security platform that calls for a broad mix of social programs to attack the roots of crime and improved police intelligence. Thoughtful analysts call for a "drain the swamp" approach that would empower the community and deny the opportunity for organized crime to take hold. The Panamanian National Police has embraced the concept of community policing and has undertaken NAS-funded training based on that model.

¶4. (SBU) The prevention approach makes sense for Panama for several reasons. Panama has not yet seen the levels of gang violence that have affected the northern Central American countries. Experts believe that Panama's gang problem is still in an early phase and

can be contained with robust at-risk youth programs. In addition, Panama's courts and prisons are the weakest elements of its criminal justice system, and both are plagued by corruption. Even if Panama were able to arrest large numbers of traffickers, its courts would likely fail to convict them and the prison system, known cynically as "gang university," would be unable to hold them.

Our Message: Supporting Strong Communities

¶5. (SBU) In recent weeks Embassy Panama has launched a public diplomacy program to highlight U.S. support for Panamanian NGOs and community organizations that are operating successful prevention programs. We are pressing the message that the answer to Panama's crime and security problems lies in strengthening communities so that law-abiding citizens own the streets and create an environment that drives out crime. We have organized a series of events featuring the Ambassador visiting sites around Panama and interacting with community leaders whose programs are making a difference in the lives of ordinary Panamanians. The bi-weekly visits in underprivileged neighborhoods have included a music academy, a Kiwanis sports club, an after-school arts program, community centers, and baseball camps. We look to support these organizations both with our own funds and by helping them to attract private sector funding. Media coverage of the Ambassador's visits has been excellent, and the media has clearly conveyed the message that the U.S. Government believes that the work of those organizations makes Panama's communities stronger and more secure. The Ambassador's message tag line with the media is "security begins with strong communities."

¶6. (SBU) When the anticipated Merida ESF funding arrives, we will broaden our message to promote education and English teaching. Education has special resonance for Panamanians because of a widespread belief that the country urgently needs to reform and improve its education system in order to maintain the high levels of economic growth and prosperity Panama has enjoyed in recent years.

It's Not Just About US

¶7. (SBU) Panama cooperates very closely with the U.S. in interdiction efforts, and cocaine seizures in the Panama region are the highest in the hemisphere. As in most countries in the region, drug trafficking historically has been perceived here as a "Gringo problem" that did not greatly concern Panama. In that context, most Panamanians were indifferent about their government's collaboration with the U.S. on interdiction efforts.

¶8. (SBU) However, the recent dramatic increase in drug-related crime could change that perception. Panamanians have never seen assassinations and violent crime like they are currently experiencing, and the public mood is bordering on panic. People are demanding action, and the current government of President Torrijos is perceived as having been ineffective in stopping crime. The Torrijos government is also seen as very cooperative with the U.S. on drug interdiction.

¶9. (SBU) In order to maintain the support of policymakers and the public for our joint interdiction programs, Panamanians must feel confident that U.S. programs like Merida will make a positive impact on their critical crime problem. Panamanians must see the U.S. as their ally in solving a shared problem that affects all countries in the region. Our message cannot simply be about stopping drugs headed to the U.S. At the end of the day, we are seeking to encourage Panama and other Central American countries to formulate constructive policies that see them taking full responsibility for their own security. The long term viability of our interdiction programs, and of our own security, depends in part on our success in delivering that message.

STEPHENSON